

PROCESSED WORLD

2.001



20th Anniversary
Special Edition!

The Greatest Speedup in Human History!

Menu

PROCESSED WORLD 2.001

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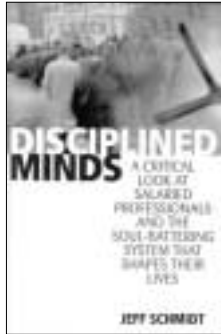
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Disciplined Minds:
A CRITICAL LOOK AT SALARIED
PROFESSIONALS AND THE
SOUL-BATTERING SYSTEM THAT
SHAPES THEIR LIVES

By Jeff Schmidt
Rowman and Littlefield
NY, NY: 2001



A lot lurks beneath the workplace goal of professionalism. The popular and technical meanings of “professional” interact to reveal a whole world of social relations. One of the most important is that “professional” isn’t an appearance—it’s a way of life. An excellent book by Jeff Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds* examines both the social role and the training of the professional. Even more importantly, he gives a whole slew of techniques for resisting professionalism in college and at work.

He writes that “[o]ne of this book’s goals is to deconstruct the minimum requirements that make a person a professional. ... As professionals become a bigger segment of the forces of production, so the production of professionals becomes a bigger activity in society ... The supposed political neutrality of the process of professional qualification [is] a myth ... The ideological obedience that the qualification system requires for success turns out to be identical to the ideological obedience that characterizes the work of the salaried professional.”

He presents intriguing ideas about the differences between expectations and ideals and the realities settled for. Even MBAs would demand more money to work for a tobacco company than for a non-profit. Women are less likely to be bought off than men, which, he opines, may contribute to the “glass-ceiling” that keeps women from upper management.

He disposes of the popular myth of the left-wing/liberal leanings of professionals. Using polls during the Korean and Vietnam wars he demonstrates that the percentage of people who supported these wars goes up with educational level. Although some studies have shown professionals to more liberal on broadly posed social questions, when actual issues of work-place hierarchy arise, the veneer strips away. With only about five percent of all full-time college professors considering themselves left of the conservative-liberal mainstream (the number of right-wingers is about 0.4 percent), it’s hard to see why universities have such leftist reputations.

“For understanding the professional, the concept of ‘ideology’ will emerge as much more useful than that of ‘skill.’ But what is ideology exactly? Ideology is thought that justifies action ... Economics may bring you back to your employer day after day, but it is ideology that makes

that activity feel like a reasonable or unreasonable way to spend your life.

“Work in general is becoming more and more ideological, and so is the workforce that does it. ... Of course, ideology has been a workplace issue all along: Employers have always scrutinized the attitudes and values of the people they hire, to protect themselves ... Today, however, for a relatively small but rapidly growing fraction of jobs, employers will carefully assess your attitude for an additional reason: its crucial role in the work itself. On these jobs, which are in every field, from journalism and architecture to education and commercial art, your view of the world threatens to affect not only the quantity and quality of what you produce, but also the very nature of the product. ... [A] prerequisite for employment is the willingness and ability to exercise what I call ideological discipline.”

He also explores the concept of “assignable curiosity” as a hallmark of the successful professional. Scientists and researchers must restrict their curiosity to narrow areas of interest to their masters; at the same time there is a remarkable ability to invent good reasons to delve into narrow—but useful—areas of study.

Not all modern offices are dominated by professionals, and so to some extent the material in this book may be less applicable outside academia. I work for a dot-com, and there are no doubt some advanced degrees present, but the fields of computers and information technology have expanded so rapidly that credentialed workers (i.e. those stamped and certified by the graduate degree programs) are often hard to find. Many technologies have evolved more rapidly than the standard education, and even the most current degree could be outmoded in a few years. OJT (on the job training) is far more likely to be necessary to keep up on new developments. The very nature of the work tends to draw people with a similar problem-solving desire, and often a similar background. That in turn “selects” and filters much like graduate school. Although the “how” may be unusually flexible, the “why” is not.

After showing why the workplace requires certain traits, Schmidt visits the standardized tests so familiar to U.S. high schools. He does an excellent job of showing why these tests are inherently biased (and, indeed, must be so), not merely due to content—which Educational Testing Service et. al. try to correct—but because of the structure and demands of the questions. By selecting for those students who are willing to work artificial problems within a very constricted time frame and produce the correct formula (often an answer learned by rote from studying other tests), the system winnows out those not willing to conform to artificial rules. It deems most valuable those who know “how” rather than “why.” The tests provide a façade of neutrality, allowing the student to make decisions about his or her future based on seemingly objective facts.

Statistics show that most potential professionals will fail. In 1997 some 2.8 million people graduated from high

school while a half million didn't finish.

On the graduates, 1.2 million enrolled in four year schools and another 630,000 in two-year schools.

Other studies show that of those that go to 4-year colleges, roughly half graduate; of those, half will go to graduate school, and half of *those* will get an advanced degree. Of the junior colleges students, only about five percent go to a four year university. The apparent neutrality of the testing process provides the same sort of "cooling out" for those that fail as a shill does in a classic sting. Rather than blaming the system, the shill persuades the "mark" to blame himself, or fate. In the same way that a con game can't be won by most players, so to is graduate school a goal that won't be attained by most students.

The concept of legitimacy holds sway in professionalism; subordination to authority is a central component. It's common for such workers to be aware of the effect of their work on the world, but it is very uncommon for them to move beyond criticism and sarcasm. Schmidt quotes Max Horkheimer: "Well-informed cynicism is only another mode of conformity." It serves to palliate the worst threats to a professional's world by encapsulating such issues in a funny wrapper, discarding any alternatives as "unrealistic." In the end, even if they wanted to, there is no way for them to actually do anything.

"Professionals are angry about such abuses of power, but having no vision of how power in the schools, in the workplace and the larger society could be distributed more democratically, they naturally look for ways to make the present hierarchical power structures work. Here the choices are limited—restaff the hierarchy with 'better people' or give those at the top even more power so they can 'act decisively.' So even the most well-meaning individuals end up reinventing some such elitist or authoritarian solution. ... Those who have no vision of greater democracy are paralyzed even further by the individualism inherent in their outlook. They retreat in fear at the mere suggestion of joining with others ..." [B]ecause of the threat to their idealized images of themselves as rugged individuals.

The most valuable sections borrow from, among other sources, U.S. Army doctrine for Prisoners of War to help resist brainwashing. The techniques and methods—33 in number—which may allow the "radical professional" (and those radicals who to have to deal with professionals) are a refreshing antidote to the usual weak palliatives offered in many books. They range from fairly innocuous to quite visible and even dangerous, and include:

- encourage coworkers to connect themselves with radical organizations and to read and subscribe to radical publications. You circulate anti-establishment periodicals, or selected articles from them ...
- assign your own curiosity. On the job, you develop and pursue your own goals while supposedly pursuing your

employer's goals. You steal as much time and as many resources as possible to do this. You encourage the hiring of more employees to give everyone more time to pursue their own goals.

- give priority, during working hours, to helping coworkers with their own self-assigned, politically progressive projects.
- channel as much useful information as possible, especially inside information, to opposition groups, publications and individuals ... you may have to act anonymously ... [which] does not mean acting alone—that you only do when there is no other way. ...

- sharpen and deepen your coworkers' dissatisfaction with the restrictions on their work ...
- help organize a union. After all, management is organized and sticks together to defend its interests.
- hire coworkers on the basis of character ...
- work to abolish professionals. That is, you work to eliminate the professional/nonprofessional division of labor
- undermine management's information advantage ...

The author, a long-time friend of *PW*, was fired for writing this book. The pretext was his first paragraph in the introduction: "This book is stolen. Written in part on stolen time, that is." He details the problems he had in physics graduate school at U.C. Irvine, in particular running afoul of a professor (and science fiction writer), Gregory Benford, who apparently took offense at Schmidt's politics, and campaigned to get Schmidt fired. Let this be a warning and an inspiration. Go out and buy a couple copies for friends. 4 stars! ●

"Flight and Other Stories" is a great collection of short stories, just released by the University of Nevada Press (2001, ISBN 0-87414-359-0). The author, José Skinner, focuses mostly on the varieties of experience of Latinos in the United States. Amidst echoes of foreign conflicts (Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador) a varied cast—a former junkie, an Hispanic-named lawyer who has virtually no latino heritage, school kids, marijuana smugglers, lovers and adulterers—inhabits diverse landscapes. The recent US census shows that an ever larger area of this country is drawing its labor force from immigrants from Mexico and Central America, and with those workers come changes in food and music, as well as changes in identity. I'm taken with "Age of Copper," a story that is mostly a flashback to a young Chilenos' adolescence as a newcomer to the U.S. during the Allende period (1970-73). The protagonist's presentation of himself, and his own ambivalences, are delicately explored. José's book is a good read, illuminating the small victories and defeats of daily life.

—P. Morales